AN ESSAY ON THE GOODNESS of GOD AS MANIFESTED IN THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST.

Published, in pursuance of the Will of the late Mr. *Norris*, as having gained the Annual Prize instituted by him in the University of *Cambridge*.

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LOVE WITHOUT END, AND WITHOUT MEASURE GRACE.
Milton.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE best apology I can make for printing the following Essay appears on the Title-page. Without some such reason, I should scarcely have ventured to publish my thoughts on a subject, which has been so often and so ably treated. The subject, indeed, is not easily to be exhausted; but as the best thoughts are also, in general, the most obvious, I had little chance of saying any thing upon it, which would not be deficient either in novelty or importance.

Since, however, the possibility of being thus called upon must be acknowleged to have been foreseen

foreseen, I ought not voluntarily to have obliged myself to that, which can be defended only *on the plea of necessity. As a further apology, therefore, for submitting this little performance to the public, I beg leave to observe, that truths which, like those of Religion, admit not of strict demonstration, may receive additional confirmation from every particular investigation of them, though no new proofs be discovered, and no new method be pursued. It is only requisite, to this purpose, that the inquiry should be instituted on* matter of fact, *and conducted by a* train of thinking. *Every time the same conclusion is thus arrived at, we gain a fresh testimony of its truth; and the credibility of the conclusion ought to rise, as the number of such testimonies increases. That my Essay might, in my own idea at least,*

least, possess this merit, I not only avoided intentional *Reading on the subject, but endeavoured to divest myself, as much as possible, from any opinions I might have formed respecting it from* previous *and* casual *Reading. Whether it will have the same kind of merit, in the idea of others, is plainly not for me to determine; this must doubtless rest on the internal evidence, which the reasoning bears, of its being the result of Thought.*

I will just add, what indeed has often been alleged in excuse for publishing on beaten subjects, that a different arrangement *of Thoughts may, in the estimation of some, give them a weight which they never had before.*

IPSWICH,
May 25, 1786.

E. P.

THE GOODNESS of GOD AS MANIFESTED, &c.

THE Goodneſs ſhown in the beſtowing of any benefit is to be eſtimated by a joint conſideration of the *magnitude* of the benefit, and the *manner of conferring* it. To have a juſt idea, therefore, of the Goodneſs of God in ſending Jeſus Chriſt into the world, we muſt conſider the *advantages* ariſing from

that event, and the *circumstances* under which it took place.

It is evident, at firſt view, that accurate knowledge, with reſpect to either of theſe enquiries, is not to be attained; and it would, indeed, be preſumptuous to ſuppoſe, that of the Goodneſs of the incomprehenſible God, in whatever inſtance exerted, an adequate idea can be formed.

On this divine act, however, ſo clearly expreſſive of benevolence, it will be uſeful to contemplate, though we cannot have a full conception of its merits; the ſlighteſt attention to it will enable us to ſee, that it has high and juſt claims on our gratitude and love.

The advantages, which mankind in general receive from *every* revelation of the

Will

Will of God, may juſtly be referred to the Miſſion of Jeſus Chriſt, not only becauſe this was the grand manifeſtation of the Divine Will, to which all others were ſubſervient, and to which they were therefore owing, but alſo becauſe the revelations previous to Chriſt's coming were, from their nature, confined to a particular family or people.

It is not improbable, indeed, that ſome light, reſpecting the truths of morality, ſhone from the Jewiſh Tabernacle on the world at large; but, while the evidences of a divine commiſſion were withheld, the authority peculiar to revelation was wanting, and the ſanctions, by which it is now enforced, could have no effect.

To the coming of Chriſt, therefore, we muſt refer all the knowledge, which the

holy ſcriptures afford us, both of the *nature* of human happineſs, and of the *means to attain it*.

It ſeems neceſſary, in order to *attain* happineſs, previouſly to enquire in *what it conſists*. While we have no determinate object in view, but purſue we know not what, we have little reaſon to be ſurprized, if the moſt valuable of all objects ſhould eſcape us. The Philoſophers of antiquity, aware of the importance of this enquiry, beſtowed on it a conſiderable ſhare of their attention: on their ſucceſs in this, as the foundation of their ſeveral ſyſtems, they reſted their hope of a laſting reputation, and of becoming the acknowledged inſtructors of mankind; inſomuch, that each ſect is, to this day, characterized by its opinion reſpecting the *ſupreme Good*. That their ſearch was ineffectual appears from this

this ſingle circumſtance, That a variety of opinions, on this ſubject, were maintained by men of nearly equal ability and authority. For, even if one of theſe opinions had been true, yet while ſufficient evidence of its being ſo was wanting, few would admit it as a principle of action. Uncertainty, in this caſe, is nearly the ſame with ignorance. While almoſt every notion of happineſs, which it is poſſible to conceive, was ſheltered by the patronage of a reſpectable name, and ſupported by a ſhow of argument, it was eaſy for each man to perſuade himſelf, that, in following his own inclination, he was purſuing the dictates of reaſon. It does not appear, however, that the true idea of happineſs was at all attained. That it was not attained ſo as to afford conviction to the multitude, we are well aſſured; ſince we know that the moſt enlightened were left in doubt. The only

concluſion,

concluſion, in which even theſe could find ſatisfaction, and which was free from error, was purely negative. The neareſt advance to truth, to which Tully, the beſt informed, if not the moſt ſagacious of uninſpired writers, could arrive in this matter, conſiſted in confeſſing, that the object of his ſearch, if it at all exiſted, exiſted not on this ſide the grave:----he could find no ſurer ground of hope, no ſtronger principle of conduct, than the perſuaſion, *That death would either conduct him to the ſupreme Good, or render him insensible of Evil.*

NOR will this ignorance be matter of ſurprize, when we conſider, that it was the Goſpel only, which brought *immortality* ſo to light, as to render it conſpicuous to all. The heathens, unacquainted with the *deſtination* of man, were ill qualified to reaſon on the nature of his ſituation here. If they

conſidered

conſidered this life as the whole of their exiſtence, and had no reſpect to it as a ſtate of probation and preparation for another, it was natural for them to eſteem, as the greateſt good, the object moſt ſuited to their inclinations. And this being in fact the caſe, it would as naturally follow, that the leader of each ſect would gain to his opinion all who had a taſte ſimilar to his own.

But if the *opinions* of the heathens were falſe, no wonder their *practice* was erroneous. If they miſtook the nature of human happineſs, they ſcarce could ſucceed in the purſuit of it. If, placing it in *pleaſure*, they ſought it in the gratification of their appetites and paſſions, no wonder, that inſtead of the object they expected, they found remorſe, diſeaſe, and death: if in *the investigation of ſpeculative truth*, no wonder they were at length convinced, that

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in much of ſuch wiſdom is much grief, and that he who increaſeth knowledge increaſeth ſorrow. If they ſought it in *riches* and *honours*, no wonder, that care and vexation of heart were their reward. And if they purſued even *Virtue* herſelf, with the hope of being perfectly happy in this life, no wonder they were ſometimes diſappointed; no wonder, while they thus miſtook the object to which ſhe was conducting them, that ſhe often appeared to them as a treacherous guide, or an empty name.

THIS fruitful cauſe of erroneous conduct the Goſpel of Chriſt has removed. It teaches us, that the greateſt Good, to which man can aſpire, is a ſenſe of the approbation of his Maker; that this, in every ſtage of his exiſtence, muſt be the foundation of his happineſs, and the only unchangeable part of it; that all externals, reſpecting either

either the mind or the body, are of a relative nature, and affect him with pleaſure or pain in a degree that depends on his own diſpoſition; that this diſpoſition, at leaſt in the preſent life, is always capable of improvement, and that therefore his happineſs admits of an infinite variety of degrees; that the obſtacles to it which now ſo much abound, though adapted to his preſent ſtate, are of an accidental and temporary nature, and will be removed in a future exiſtence; and laſtly, that enjoying, by a conformity between external objects and his inward ſtate, the higheſt felicity of which his nature, improved to what degree it may, is ſuſceptible, he will continue to enjoy it for ever. This being known, it is clear to every one what ought, in reaſon, to be the great object of his purſuit. It is evident, that his firſt care ſhould be to ſecure the rewards of eternity; that he ſhould render them as

certain and as *great* as poſſible; and that every purſuit, though productive of real preſent good, which interferes with this, ſhould be relinquiſhed.

NOR does Chriſtianity, by barely pointing out to us ſo deſirable an object, inſpire us with a vain wiſh for what we cannot reach; ---it not only tells us where happineſs may be found, but inſtructs us how to find it.

WE are taught by the Goſpel that, to obtain the favor of God, we muſt be renewed to his image, in which we were originally formed.

To render this an intelligible leſſon to us, the veil which intercepted our view of the Deity is partly removed, and his attributes, ſo far as they can be the objects of our imitation, made viſible to the human eye.

eye. And it was here that mankind greatly wanted information. The *power* of God, indeed, was ſo manifeſt from the works of creation, that the heathens could not overlook it; but their idea of his moral attributes was ſo corrupt, that it ill deſerved to be the pattern of conduct. The perfections of holineſs, juſtice, and goodneſs, were ſometimes entirely forgotten, ſometimes the ſubject of diſpute, and were ſcarce ever admitted without a mixture of the oppoſite imperfections. Of the exiſtence of theſe we have now the moſt unqueſtionable evidence; and our ideas of them, though ſtill inadequate, are rectified and enlarged. God, in every manifeſtation of Himſelf, has appeared as a Being who delighteth in purity and uprightneſs, and who is Himſelf juſt and holy in all his ways and works; and, in the Miſſion of his Son, his Goodneſs, before obſcured, ſhone forth in its genuine

ſplendour. The Goſpel, itſelf the higheſt inſtance of what it teaches, repreſents the Deity as the affectionate Father of mankind; as regarding, with an eye of benevolence, the concerns of all his creatures; and as deſirous to communicate to all, according to their ſeveral capacities, a portion of his own felicity: it removes the diſtruſt, on this ſubject, which the prevalence of evil had occaſioned, and accounts for that prevalence in a way that conſiſts with the beſt intentions.

BEING furniſhed, then, with this idea, the way to happineſs is no longer doubtful. Since, as rational creatures, we muſt always be acceptable to God, and happy in ourſelves, in proportion as we advance in virtues reſembling the Divine Perfections, we now know, that he will be moſt happy, who moſt ſucceſsfully forms himſelf to holineſs, juſtice,

juſtice, and goodneſs; and that the practice of theſe virtues, as they comprehend our ſeveral duties to ourſelves, to God, and to the world, ſhould be our great buſineſs and employment.

It is thus that Chriſtianity, by the *knowledge of facts* which it diſcloſes, tends to conduct us to happineſs. We may add, that the particular branches of our duty are ſo clearly marked out by its *precepts*, that whatever is our condition of life, or the occurrences in which we are engaged, we ſcarcely can be ignorant what part we ought to take.

Further, leſt this leſſon, though underſtood, ſhould be thought impracticable, a perfect example of it is placed before us: the glory of the Godhead, too dazzling for us to contemplate in its original effulgence, is veiled

veiled in human nature, and made to ſhine on us with milder beams. We behold, in Jeſus Chriſt, all the perfections of God which it is our duty to imitate, and all the unavoidable infirmities of man that can render the imitation of them difficult.

One would conclude, from previous reaſoning, that inſtruction beyond this was not to be expected; that mankind, having before them precept and example, would want no further information. But man, alas! cannot reach perfection. Whenever he takes a view of his ſtate, he finds much to lament, much to rectify, before he can proceed with confidence and chearfulneſs. Leſt the remorſe, therefore, ariſing from conſciouſneſs of guilt incurred, and the fear of incurring more, ſhould cauſe him to deſpond, Chriſtianity, accomodating itſelf to his weakneſs, leads him to a fountain of

comfort,

comfort, of which nature could give him no notice. It provides a propitiation for ſin, and opens a door of forgiveneſs to the penitent offender; it ſtrengthens the feeble efforts of the returning wanderer with the promiſe of guidance and aſſiſtance; and aſſures all, that no ſincere endeavour to improve in virtue ſhall be made in vain.

But our religion does not leave us here; ----not content, like Philoſophy, with marking out the road to happineſs in ſilent dignity, it condeſcends, with a graciouſneſs truly benign, to *invite* and *perſuade* us to walk in it. It does not, indeed, by over-ruling our liberty, remove the poſſibility of our going wrong; but it lays before us the conſiderations, which are beſt adapted to make us go right. By acquainting us beforehand with the remote and certain conſequences of our actions, it anſwers the

purpoſe

purpoſe of experience, the moſt convincing teacher of wiſdom; and by painting them to our imaginations in the moſt lively colours poſſible, it powerfully engages our affections to co-operate with our reaſon. It not only excites to virtue, but deters from vice; ſhewing, that as the one is the only path to happineſs, ſo the other, in every direction, leads to miſery. The malignity of ſin was never ſo fully diſplayed, as by the circumſtances of our Saviour's Miſſion. Previouſly to this, men did not ſee, at leaſt they ſaw not with ſufficient clearneſs, that ſin and miſery are, by the nature of things, inſeparably connected. Had all men been vicious in the *ſame way*, the pernicious tendency of ſin would quickly have been evinced by their final deſtruction; and, in particular ſtates, inſtances of this have not been wanting. But it is probable that, in general, ſin, with reſpect to communities, has

has not been permitted to have its full effect. Providence, without reſtraining the liberty of mankind, may have placed them in ſuch ſituations, and preſented to them ſuch temptations, that the appetites and paſſions of ſome, though inordinately indulged, are nearly balanced by thoſe of others; and that thus an effect of the ſame kind, though leſs in degree, is produced, as if all were directed by reaſon. It is eaſy, therefore, to conceive, that a ſociety, the members of which are all vicious, may yet, by this production of good from evil, be in real proſperity. Nothing of this nature, indeed, can poſſibly take place, with reſpect to an individual. A man, however inconſiſtent with himſelf, cannot ſo practiſe different vices, as that the reſult of the whole ſhall not be pernicious. It is neceſſary to his happineſs, that every part of his conduct ſhould be governed by right reaſon;

one deviation from it, therefore, cannot be compenſated by another. Beſides, as men commonly err by the force of ſome predominant inclination, the error cannot, of conſequence, be fully counteracted; for it is a contradiction to ſuppoſe, that a man can be actuated by two paſſions, equal in ſtrength, and of an oppoſite kind. Notwithſtanding this, the duration and proſperity of depraved communities, inſtead of being conſidered, what it is in truth, as an evidence of an interpoſing and merciful Providence, had contributed to make men blind to the pernicious tendency of ſin. But we now clearly ſee, that virtue is the vital principle of a rational nature, and that vice neceſſarily leads to death. We are taught by the expreſs declarations of Scripture, by the light which it throws on moral truth in general, and eſpecially by the appointment of ſuch an atonement, even for penitent offenders,

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as the precious death of Chriſt, that ſin, in every kind and degree, is hateful in itſelf to God, and in its effects deſtructive to man.

THUS does Chriſtianity, by ſhowing us what conduct is acceptable to God, and adapted to prepare us for future enjoyments, direct its chief aim, to ſecure our *eternal* intereſt. But it is not unmindful of our *preſent* welfare: it tends to remove the obſtacles to happineſs, which we meet with in this world; and, as far as is conſiſtent with its principal deſign, it actually does remove them. By procuring us the means of reconciliation with God, by aſſuring us of the pardon of our ſins on repentance and reformation, and by the ſure ground of hope which it affords of our being happy hereafter, it gives us that peace and ſatisfaction of mind, which was ſought for in vain by the light of nature, and which is itſelf a never-failing

ſource of actual delight. It is friendly to the body, as well as to the mind. By the moderate uſe of pleaſures which it inculcates, it prepares us for the full enjoyment of life, and all its attendant bleſſings; and by the ſpirit of benevolence which it inſpires, it tends to provide, that a neceſſary ſhare of thoſe bleſſings ſhall be wanting to none. By conciliating the affections of men towards each other, under the idea of their being children of a common parent, and fellow-heirs of the ſame promiſes, it promotes mutual truſt and confidence, and cheriſhes that ſympathy with the feelings of others, which gives to ſociety its higheſt reliſh. It tends, not only to procure poſitive good, but to leſſen evil; and of the evil, which it does not remove, it greatly alleviates the preſſure. By forbidding injuſtice of every kind, it tends to prevent all the evils which ariſe from intentional wrong; and where

intereſts unavoidably interfere, it directs us to ſoften our oppoſition by candour and gentleneſs. It extends its influence to the diminiſhing even of *natural* evil. It is probable, that if the Temperance, which Chriſtianity dictates, were univerſally practiſed, many of the diſeaſes, to which men are now ſubject, would be totally eradicated. In any caſe, it is certain that, by this mean, the violence of them would be much abated. With reſpect to thoſe which might ſtill remain, and to other inconveniences ariſing from natural cauſes, it is evident that Chriſtianity, by directing all men to the diligent employment of their talents for the public good, greatly tends to defend us againſt their influence, and to provide us with ſuitable remedies.

WERE all men, then, actuated by the ſpirit of the goſpel, they would be happy,

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to a conſiderable degree, even in their preſent ſtate. Envy and ambition being once removed, contending intereſts would be ſettled, not by violence, but by reaſon, and war and bloodſhed would be no more. Each would contribute to the happineſs of thoſe, with whom he was connected,--- would increaſe their joys, and mitigate their ſorrows. The united efforts of all, according to their ſeveral abilities, would have a wonderful effect in removing evils, which now ſcarce ſeem to admit of remedy. All the malevolent paſſions, having no objects on which they could be exerciſed, would ceaſe to diſturb our tranquillity; and the mind, conſtantly warmed and brightened by the calm ſun-ſhine of benevolent affections, would experience a foretaſte of Heaven. Such are the happy effects, which the Goſpel of Chriſt tends to produce; and which, whenever it ſhall univerſally prevail,

vail, will follow it as a neceſſary conſe-quence.

But ſince, while Chriſtianity is but partially practiſed, its profeſſors muſt neceſſarily be ſubject to many of the evils common to others, and to ſome that are peculiar to themſelves, the means of ſupporting theſe evils are provided. The Goſpel, by promiſing to its diſciples rewards proportionable to their ſufferings, opens to them a ſource of comfort, from which others are totally excluded; and enables them, under the preſſure of the heavieſt afflictions, to reſt with reſignation and content.

To theſe inſtances of a benevolent tendency in the Miſſion of our Saviour, there is nothing of a contrary kind to be oppoſed. The Goſpel has, by ſome of its enemies, been

been deemed *superfluous*, and by others *ineffectual*; but none of its genuine doctrines have ever been conſidered as *pernicious*. All that has been advanced, on this head, has evidently been founded on ignorance or wilful miſrepreſentation. The primitive Chriſtians were accuſed of perpetrating, in obedience to the precepts of their religion, the greateſt immoralities; but theſe accuſations were ſupported by no better teſtimony, than opinion drawn from popular report; and were, indeed, ſo evidently falſe, that they ſoon ceaſed to be urged. That profeſſors of Chriſtianity have, in all ages, been guilty of actions which morality condemns, is not to be denied; and that the precepts of the Goſpel have ſometimes been adduced, in defence of ſuch actions, muſt alſo be admitted. Neither of theſe conceſſions, however, militates againſt our aſſertion. All profeſſors of Chriſtianity are

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not truly chriſtians; and on thoſe, whoſe faith is ſincere, the effect of their faith may be very unequal. There is an infinite variety of degrees in which a principle, admitted in general to be reaſonable and juſt, may be applied to the regulation of the conduct. Many perſons who, on ordinary occaſions, act by the ſpirit which Chriſtianity breathes, ſuffer it to be overborne, when it interferes with a great and preſent intereſt. But let not ſuch effects of the deſertion of a principle be attributed to the principle itſelf. It would be unreaſonable to allege, in order to ſhew the method of mathematical demonſtration to be fallacious, that many mathematicians have drawn erroneous concluſions:---it is plain their miſtakes were occaſioned, not by an attention to the principles of demonſtration, but by a departure from them. With reſpect to the inſtances, in which Chriſtianity has been

pleaded, as countenancing criminal actions, we need only obſerve, that they may, in general, be accounted for in the ſame way: they were, for the moſt part, wilful perverſions of a rule which thwarted the views of the interpreters. Nor let this be thought an uncharitable aſſertion. Many, no doubt, have been miſled, by the authority of others, to conſider, as the dictates of inſpiration, principles which cannot be contemplated without horror; but ſo clearly is the ſenſe of Scripture on the ſide of ſtrict morality, that it cannot, we may venture to affirm, in the *first instance* be innocently conſtrued in favour of impoſition and cruelty. But on this ground we have, as was obſerved, no enemy to combat. The immoral lives of Chriſtians have appeared, even to infidels, inconſiſtent with the ſpirit of their religion: they have hence taken occaſion to ſuggeſt, that the belief of it is not ſo common as the profeſ-

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ſion; being ready to admit, that of a conviction of the truth of Chriſtianity, the practice of virtue, in its moſt extenſive ſenſe, is the genuine reſult.

WERE the ſubject of our enquiry an *human* action, we ſhould be content, in order to aſcertain the character of Goodneſs in the agent, thus to have ſhown, that it has a benevolent *tendency*; but as it is the work of a Being, who ſees the remoteſt conſequences of things, and whoſe intentions may therefore be judged of from events, it may be proper, if not neceſſary, to ſhow, that a benevolent effect has been *actually produced*. Accordingly, if we compare the preſent ſtate of mankind with that which ſubſiſted before the coming of our Saviour, we ſhall find, that it would be difficult to point out an inſtance, in which the *benevolent intentions*

*of Goodness were more completely fulfilled.**

We have no infallible criterion, indeed, by which we can judge of the happineſs of others, and eſpecially of that portion of it which ariſes from *reflection*. As, therefore, the conſolations of Chriſtianity are chiefly of a mental nature, we cannot exactly eſtimate them. But though the meaſure of them be unknown, we have no reaſon to doubt their exiſtence. The belief of Chriſtianity is ſo evidently calculated to relieve the mind from many anxious fears, and to inſpire it with joyful hopes, that in every one, in whom it takes place, it muſt be a ſpring of comfort; and indeed we know that thouſands, in every age of the Goſpel, have given their teſtimony to this, under circumſtances which rendered their ſincerity unqueſtionable,

* 2 Theſſ. i. 11.

able. If any one who profeſſes to be a Chriſtian, wants additional teſtimony, let him aſk himſelf, Whether he would, for any earthly conſideration whatever, give up the hopes which he grounds on the promiſes of the Goſpel? His anſwer will, no doubt, convince him, that the coming of Chriſt has already actually contributed to the happineſs of mankind.

With reſpect to *externals*, though it cannot with certainty be determined how far the alterations, which have taken place in them ſince the introduction of Chriſtianity, are to be attributed to its influence, nor how far the alterations themſelves are beneficial, yet we have every reaſon, which we could have, to conclude, that here alſo an increaſe of happineſs has been effected. The benevolent ſpirit of the Goſpel, though ſometimes ſeverely checked, has ſpread

itſelf

itſelf through all the relations of ſociety. It has pervaded every department of civil government, influencing the framing of laws, and directing their execution. Numberleſs cruelties, which had the ſanction of the Heathen Magiſtrate, are not heard of among Chriſtians but with abhorrence. *Wars*, though ſtill too frequent and too cruel, have been gradually becoming leſs ſo. If any one is diſpoſed to queſtion this, let him, after conſidering the ſtate of Chriſtian Countries for a few centuries paſt, caſt back his eye on the ages of antiquity; and let him, in particular, recollect, that the Romans, during the whole time of their exiſtence as a Pagan Nation, were almoſt perpetually engaged in ſome extenſive work of deſolation; that often, at the taking of a populous city, the inhabitants were indiſcriminately put to the ſword; and that others were reduced to abject ſlavery,

and

and either carried captives to a foreign country, or obliged to cultivate for their enemies the lands which were once their own. The iron hand of *Slavery*, though ſtill perhaps as heavy as ever, has greatly contracted the ſphere of its oppreſſion; if it yet reigns with heathen rigour, Chriſtianity has ſo far prevailed, that a leſs proportion of mankind is ſubject to its ſway. The miſeries of Slavery in general may poſſibly have been exaggerated; but, conſidered in its moſt favourable form, it is a bitter ingredient in the cup of life, and whatever contributes to remove it is highly beneficial to the human race.

With reſpect to good of a leſs extenſive nature, we may obſerve, that the ſpirit of Chriſtianity is viſible in the eſtabliſhments, with which this nation in particular abounds, for the relief of the neceſſitous

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and diſtreſſed. It is this which has made a legal proviſion, that the neceſſaries of life ſhould be wanting to none; which has added to many, by voluntary donations, the comforts and conveniences of it; and which has given riſe to numberleſs beneficial inſtitutions both for education and ſupport.

Nor is it to be conſidered as the leaſt of the benefits of Chriſtianity, that it opens to all the door of moral and religious inſtruction. The knowledge of duty, even ſo far as it was diſcovered, was ſought for in vain in the Temples of the Heathens; their prieſts, content with the celebration of myſterious rites, pretended not to the character of teachers of wiſdom. To the ſchools of the Philoſophers the multitude had no acceſs; and had they been admitted, the want of previous qualifications muſt have rendered their admittance uſeleſs. We

have

have now no reaſon to complain, that information, on ſubjects in which all are equally intereſted, is partially diſpenſed. The Chriſtian Churches, mindful of the poor and the ignorant, no leſs than of the rich and the learned, invite all to partake of their inſtructions; and it is their peculiar glory, that their lectures, intelligible to all, require no other preparation than a deſire to be informed.

It may, perhaps, be ſaid, that theſe changes in the ſtate of ſociety, and others which might be mentioned, are the natural effects of a gradual improvement in the theory of morals; and that this improvement, like that in any other art or ſcience, is to be accounted for on the principle of accumulative experience. But this is an aſſertion, which it would be extremely difficult to prove, and which, till it has been proved, has no weight. We may, with much more

appearance of truth, affirm, that there is not a ſingle principle of conduct, favourable to the real intereſts of mankind, that may not fairly be deduced from ſome doctrine or precept of the Goſpel. Beſides, it has already been ſhown, that the moſt powerful *motives* to beneficence, and indeed the only motives on which we can rely, are ſuch as no human inveſtigation could diſcover.

HAVING taken this view of the *benefits*, which reſult to mankind from the Miſſion of Jeſus Chriſt, it remains, that we conſider the *circumſtances* with which it was attended.

WE may obſerve, in the firſt place, that whatever be the *magnitude* of a gift, it is neceſſary, in order to ſhow the goodneſs of him who beſtows it, to prove the beneficial effects of it to be *designed*. This, in the caſe

caſe before us, appears from the nature of the gift itſelf. It is evident, that all the advantages, which have been mentioned as proceeding from the Miſſion of our Saviour, are not an *accidental* conſequence of it, but its natural and genuine reſult. It is the *design*, as well as the *tendency* and *effect* of the Chriſtian religion, to promote the happineſs of mankind. But there may be degrees of goodneſs, with reſpect to the deſign of conferring a benefit, even when the deſign itſelf is admitted. If a perſon, by an action which anſwers ſome purpoſe to himſelf, and which he would have done, had my caſe been out of conſideration, render me a ſervice which he might have avoided to render, or which he might have rendered to another, he manifeſts *some degree* of goodneſs towards me,---I am undoubtedly indebted to his *intention*, as well as to his *performance*; but much greater

is his goodneſs to me, if the action by which he contributes to my advantage, be undertaken *ſolely* with a view to it. This is the caſe, with reſpect to the benefits reſulting from the Miſſion of Jeſus Chriſt;----He came into the world *purposely* to ſave it. It is impoſſible that God, in doing good, can have any other end in view than the advantage of his creatures; or that he can be excited to it by any other motive, than that propenſity to communicate happineſs, which is the conſtituent quality of Goodneſs. If we ſeek for additional proof, we may find it in every occurrence of our Saviour's hiſtory. Whoever conſiders his behaviour, both in the active and ſuffering parts of his life, will ſee abundant reaſon to confeſs, that the ſole object of his coming was love to man. The work of our ſalvation was the great buſineſs, to which he devoted himſelf; to this all his actions,

whether

whether public or private, which we find recorded, were ſubſervient. The *manner* too, in which he diſcharged the purpoſe of his Miſſion, contributed to make the purpoſe itſelf conſpicuous. Though his doctrines and precepts, bearing in themſelves evident marks of authority and truth, needed no external aid to recommend them; yet was he careful to deliver them at ſuch times, and on ſuch occaſions, as gave them additional force. Though his inſtructions were intended for all, he improved the opportunities of his ſituation, and made them peculiarly perſuaſive to thoſe who had the happineſs to hear him. Though miracles of any harmleſs kind (the benevolent tendency of his *doctrine* being ſuppoſed) would have teſtified his divine commiſſion, he choſe in general to perform ſuch, as ſhould anſwer ſome immediate purpoſe of benevolence. He employed not his power

in works of pageantry and empty ſplendour, in ſhowing *ſigns from Heaven*; but in acts of ſubſtantial utility, in *feeding the hungry*, in *healing the diseased*, and in *raising the dead*. When duty did not demand his oppoſition, he carefully avoided every occaſion of offence. Far from having any ſelfiſh ends in view, either of power, riches, or glory, or from employing his influence in the attainment of them, he diſcouraged every idea that had ſuch a tendency; plainly declaring, that his kingdom was not of this world, and that he received not honour from men. On the contrary, to exhibit an example of paſſive obedience, he was content to forego the common and innocent enjoyments of life; in the purſuit of his benevolent purpoſe, he endured perpetual hardſhip and fatigue; and at length, to complete it, he voluntarily ſubmitted himſelf to ignominy, to cruelty, and to death.

OUR Saviour's conduct and ſufferings, as indicating the *design* of his coming, lead us to conſider another circumſtance, which tends to diſplay the goodneſs of Him who formed that deſign.

IN eſtimating the goodneſs of an human action, we think it reaſonable to have reſpect to the inconvenience, which is incurred in the performance of it. We acknowlege, that the poor Widow, who, to the leſſening of what was before too little for her ſupport, caſt two mites into the Treaſury, expreſſed a greater degree of generoſity than thoſe, who, though they caſt in more, only diminiſhed their abundance, and felt no inconvenience from the gift. Something like this, with the allowance ever to be made in reaſoning from human to divine concerns, muſt be taken into our account, if we would judge properly of the inſtance of goodneſs

before

before us. God ſent on the gracious errand of our ſalvation, his *only-begotten Son*. Whatever meaning we affix to that Title, great muſt be the dignity of the Perſon to whom it belongs, and great muſt be the goodneſs of God, in ſending Him to our relief. But when we conſider that though he was ſo in the form of God, as to be equal with God, he yet deprived himſelf of his equality, and appeared in the form of ſuch a dependant creature as man; and that being in this ſtate, he ſo humbled himſelf in it, as to ſubmit to its moſt lowly and painful circumſtances, we are loſt in admiration;--- we evidently ſee, that the goodneſs, implied in ſuch condeſcenſion and ſuffering, far ſurpaſſes our conception.

It may, perhaps, be thought, that our ſalvation might have been effected, without this apparent evil; that our pardon might have

have been freely given, without the appointment of a ſuffering Redeemer.

BUT it is to be remembered, that we could not have received, from ſuch a pardon, the benefits we receive from the Miſſion of Jeſus Chriſt. Of the ſyſtem of redemption the pardon of ſin is but a part;---it extends to the preventing of ſin in future. And both are equally neceſſary to the happineſs of man. Such is the nature of ſin, that no method of redemption, which did not tend to deſtroy its *dominion*, as well as to remit the poſitive penalties annexed to it, could have been effectual. It was neceſſary, therefore, that the malignity of ſin ſhould be fully diſplayed; that the puniſhment due to it ſhould be ſo remitted, as not to weaken, but to ſtrengthen the conſiderations againſt the future commiſſion of it; that the path of duty ſhould be ſo marked out to us, that

we could not miſtake it; and that it ſhould be ſo ſmoothed, that we might be able to walk in it. How theſe purpoſes could have been ſo effectually accompliſhed, as by the appointment of a Saviour, who might exhibit to us, by his precepts and example, a perfect and authoritative pattern of conduct; and who might expiate our ſins by his ſufferings; or whether they could at all have been accompliſhed otherwiſe, it will not be eaſy for man to ſay. On the contrary, it is reaſonable, ſurely, to believe, that the ſcheme of Redemption by Jeſus Chriſt, if not the only poſſible one, is yet the beſt, were it merely from the conſideration, that God has actually choſen it. But that it is the beſt, we have alſo additional reaſon to believe. There appears in the method of our ſalvation, now it is explained to us, a happy mixture of Juſtice and Mercy. We ſee, that though accommodated to the weakneſs of

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our unredeemed ſtate, it yet is capable of exalting us to the higheſt excellence of our nature; that while the penitent ſinner is comforted with the aſſurance of pardon, he is excited to a juſt abhorrence of his offences, and furniſhed with the moſt powerful perſuaſives to ſin no more: we ſee, in ſhort, that it is an inſtance of the moſt conſummate wiſdom; and that therefore the Goodneſs, which procured it for us at ſo high a price, juſtly demands our admiration and our gratitude.

It remains, that we conſider, as another circumſtance by which the goodneſs in beſtowing a benefit is to be eſtimated, the *relation between the giver and the receiver*.

The ſame benefit, conferred on different perſons, may indicate very different degrees of goodneſs. To do good to a friend, is but

an act of juſtice; our ſervices, though more than adequate to his performances, may perhaps be no more than a due return to his intentions. But if, unprovoked by the claims of gratitude, we do good to one, whom no previous intercourſe has endeared to us; and eſpecially if, overcoming the ſenſe of injuries received, we do good to an enemy, our beneficence proceeds from real goodneſs; and our goodneſs, ſuppoſing other circumſtances the ſame, is in proportion to the enmity which gives place to it. Man, with reſpect to God, can arrogate to himſelf neither merit nor innocence. It is impoſſible for us to render to Him more than we owe Him: the ſtricteſt obedience we can yield to Him, or the warmeſt gratitude we can feel for his favours, will not entitle us to the character of *good* towards Him. But men, far from approaching ſo near to this character as they might have approached,

alienated

alienated themſelves from God, and became his enemies. Every ſinner is the enemy of God. Whoever trangreſſes the Divine Will breaks in upon the order of nature, and counteracts that purpoſe, which aims at the eſtabliſhment of univerſal happineſs. In what ſenſe, and in what degree, he *can* counteract it, we need not enquire; it is a ſufficient indication of a wrong affection towards God, that his conduct has ſuch a tendency. When we conſider, however, that the miſchievous effects of ſin, even were they confined to the ſinner, are a real duminition of happineſs; and that if they finally diminiſh not the happineſs of others, it is owing to the interpoſition of Providence in their favour, we cannot doubt, that he who ſins, as he acts in oppoſition to God, contributes alſo really to defeat his purpoſes. That mankind in general, at the coming of our Saviour, were in this ſtate of enmity with God, ſtands not in

need

need of proof. The depravity of the Heathen World is well known. Human nature having acquired a bias towards ſin, was verging to the extremes of impiety, oppreſſion, and licentiouſneſs. The worſhip, due to the Great Creator, was either altogether withheld, or paid where it was not owing, and in a method which rendered it an abomination. The greater part of men, inſtead of endeavouring to promote univerſal happineſs, by a due diſcharge of their relative duties, and by a care that their own welfare ſhould interfere as little as poſſible with that of others, ſuffered every conſideration to give place to the deſires, which views of immediate ſelf-intereſt inſpired. Inſtead of ſeeking, in the cultivation and amendment of their minds, the proper happineſs of a rational creature, they ſunk into brutal gratifications of ſenſe, neglecting the ſuperior parts of their nature, and groſſly abuſing the reſt.

Such

Such was the general character of mankind, when God ſent his beloved Son to die for them*. It has been ſaid by a competent judge, that to die for a *good*, a *well-deſerving* man, is the height of heroiſm; and that none would make ſuch a ſacrifice for one that is merely *juſt* and *upright*:----how great, then, was the love manifeſted by Chriſt, in dying for *Sinners!* And how great the Goodneſs of God, in ſending him into the world for that purpoſe!

We have ſeen, then, that the diſpenſation of the Goſpel has been productive of many important benefits; and that theſe benefits, as well as others ſtill more important which it tends to produce, are not *accidental*, but *designed*. We have alſo ſeen, that it was accompliſhed, not in the eſtabliſhed and ordinary courſe of things, but by a very uncommon

* See Rom. ch. i.

uncommon inſtance of Divine Interpoſition in our favour,---by no leſs a ſacrifice, than the humiliation, ſufferings, and death of the Second Perſon in the Trinity. Laſtly, we have ſeen, that this grace was ſhown, not to friends, but to enemies; not to the humble and faithful worſhippers of God, but to thoſe who had oppoſed his Will, and rebelled againſt Him, by departing from the dignity and rectitude of their nature.

We may obſerve, in concluſion, that our contemplations on this ſubject ought not to reſt in barren ſpeculation, but ſhould influence our *ſentiments* and *conduct*.

Such an inſtance of Goodneſs, on whomſoever exerciſed, deſerves our *admiration* and *praiſe*; but when we conſider, that ourſelves are the objects of it, our feelings ſhould riſe to *gratitude* and *love*. And ſince God has ſhown,

ſhown, that the happineſs of man is ſo precious in his ſight, it is evident, that to co-operate with him in his benevolent purpoſes, by doing all the good we can, is the beſt expreſſion of our love, and the moſt acceptable return we can make for his Favours.

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